

# Senate Statistics

## Secretaries of the Senate

### Leslie Biffle (1945-1947, 1949-1953)



This Secretary of the Senate became nationally famous for his well-timed poll of chicken farmers. He also grabbed news headlines for exercising a function of his office that had fallen to few of his predecessors and none of his successors: he presided over the Senate. Among his most intimate friends was the president of the United States.

Born in 1889, Leslie Biffle grew up in Piggott, Arkansas, the son of a local Democratic official. He attended business school in Little Rock and moved to Washington, D.C. in 1909 as secretary to Representative [Robert Macon](#). When Macon retired four years later, Biffle secured a patronage post in the Senate folding room. In 1925, Senate Democratic leader [Joseph T. Robinson](#), a fellow Arkansan, named Biffle assistant party secretary. When the Democrats took control of the Senate in 1933, Robinson advanced Biffle to the role of majority secretary.

The dapper and diminutive five-foot-seven-inch secretary excelled as a legislative vote counter and political operative. At once gregarious and poker-faced, the blue-eyed Biffle won and kept confidences among senators of both parties. A master of the Senate's obscure folkways, Biffle regularly assisted new Democratic senators, including [Harry S. Truman](#), who entered the Senate in 1935. The two men, close in age, political views, and modest demeanor, developed a deep friendship. Biffle played a major role at the 1944 Democratic national convention in securing the vice-presidential nomination for Truman.

In February 1945, Republicans joined the Democratic majority in unanimously electing Biffle secretary of the Senate. He also took on duties as the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee's secretary-treasurer and the Democratic national convention's sergeant at arms. Nine weeks later, Biffle's considerable influence soared when Harry Truman succeeded to the presidency. Summoned to the White House to be told of President Franklin Roosevelt's death, the new president made his first phone call to Biffle to ask that congressional leaders come at once. On the following day, Truman drove to Capitol Hill for a luncheon in Biffle's back office (S-224) with seventeen of his closest former congressional colleagues. Room S-224 soon became a favorite watering hole -- "Biff's Diner" -- for members, lobbyists, and others seeking to a back channel to the

president's attention. Relying on Biffle for his accurate and frank political counsel, Truman maintained a special White House phone that rang directly to the secretary's desk. This earned the secretary nicknames that ranged from "the man who runs the Senate" and "the secretary of politics," to the "prince of wire-pullers." He was also known as the processor of "Biffle's Tomato Juice," a concoction from his rooftop garden that was widely valued as an antidote for hangovers.

On May 25, 1946, President Truman asked a special joint session of Congress for "temporary emergency" legislation to draft striking railroad workers into the armed forces. During Truman's speech, as members shouted their support of the president's drastic request, Secretary Biffle dramatically entered the packed House chamber, marched to the dais, and presented the president a slip of red paper that had just arrived from the White House. Truman glanced at it and announced, "Word has just been received that the railroad strike has been settled on terms proposed by the President." The chamber exploded in thunderous ovation. Skeptics later accused Truman and Biffle of staging this little drama to the president's advantage.

When the Republicans took control of the Senate in 1947, they elected their own secretary – a move that led the Democrats to name Biffle executive director of the Democratic Policy Committee. Before leaving as secretary, however, he got to exercise a unique responsibility of his office. Senate Rule I authorized the secretary to perform the duties of the chair in the absence of a vice president and pending the election of a president pro tempore. With the office of vice president vacant and the former president pro tempore's Senate term expired, Biffle presided during two days of procedural maneuvering over the seating of a senator. As soon as it resolved that matter, the Senate elected its president pro tempore and Biffle relinquished his office.

As professional pollsters branded Truman the underdog in the 1948 presidential campaign, the president welcomed signs of support from the "common people." Disguised in the soiled overalls and straw hat of a chicken buyer, Biffle set out in a old pickup truck to sample opinion throughout the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. Returning from his six-week journey, he advised Truman that he had a "fighting chance."

The 1948 elections confirmed Biffle's optimism by returning Truman to the White House, a Democratic majority to the Senate, and Biffle to the Office of Secretary. Four years later, in January 1953, a Republican sweep brought Leslie Biffle's forty-four-year congressional career to a close. Among the many who wished him well were three hundred members of the Washington press corps who gathered at the National Press Club to honor his service. He worked as a consultant until his death in 1966.

Columnist Doris Fleson attributed Biffle's success to the fact that his "esteem for Senators is so intense [that] he is always forgetting himself and doing favors for Republican Senators too." The *New York Times* cited his ability "to whisper without moving his lips, enabling him to transmit confidential information to Senators without fear of being overheard by anyone else."